

## Shadden's Oath

The old man sat seething with aggression. Watching TV had been his only pastime (and his only accomplishment) for the last twenty years. Twenty-four hour cable news was his only portal to the outside world; it acted both as his friend and foe. Today, that "magic box of propaganda," as he was fond of saying on days like these, was definitely his foe.

"How could people believe that puss-gutted son of a bitch, badmouthing our great nation? He's no documentarian. He's a cock-sucker! I'll tell ya, some fifty years ago, he would'a been beaten within an inch of his life for making those statements about our president. That's when this nation was great, boy. *Really great.*" Old man Smith was on his soapbox again, talking half-ass politics to one of his many disenchanted grandchildren.

"Well, whatever, Grandpa. I gotta go, Jennie's waiting for me at the diner." With that, the tall gangly boy, dressed in faded jeans, a sleeveless blue t-shirt, and baseball cap, bolted out the door.

"Billy, Billy, get back here! I gotta tell ya how I know this nation's great. *Billy!*"

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*Bum-badum-bum-bum.* The old man woke up suddenly, snorting, gagging, coughing and moaning - seemingly all at once. *Bum-badum-bum-bum. Bum-badum-bum-bum.*

"What in the hell is all that racket?" the old man grumbled. Instinctively focusing his eyes on the TV screen, he was shocked to see a group of black youths bumpin'-n-grindin' to the beat of the latest fad rap song. A few feet beside him, something rustled. Quickly, he jerked his head left to see what was coming into view. And there it was. A fat, bulbous, little head with flaxen hair and freckles, smiling at him from the neighboring couch. "Hi, Grandpa. When are you gonna get air conditioning?"

It was old man Smith's youngest grandson, Thomas (age 11). *Bum-badum-bum-bum.*

The old man looked confused by the youngster's presence. Strands of his straight white hair (or what was left of it) were sticking out in different directions as saliva steadily dripped down to the lonely patch of facial hair that dwelt on his chin; his mouth was crooked and his eyebrows raised. *Bum-badum-bum-bum.*

*"Thomas, good God, will you turn this jungle shit off!"*

"I'm hungry, Grandpa."

"Thomas, gimme that damn control now!"

Immediately after the boy passed over the TV remote, the screen jumped back, as if magically, to the redundant and super-depressing world of cable news.

The old man's eyes fixated once again, gleefully, on the headlines streaming across the bottom of the screen. After ignoring more of Thomas's utterly arbitrary and annoying comments, the old man asked in a softer voice, "How long you been here?"

"I dunno, Grandpa."

"Mmm." Apparently the old man did not care. The truth is, Thomas could have said anything while his grandfather was watching the news, and "Grandpa" would not have heard him. He would have heard Thomas speaking, but the words would have missed him. The boy could have said, "Grandpa, I think you're a cock-sucking, midget-dicked goat fucker," and Grandpa would have probably replied with his customary "Mmm" or "I see." That is the kind of power that cable news holds over Smith - especially in times of crisis.

It was a hot, sticky Saturday afternoon, just a few days before July Fourth, 2005. Smith's decrepit old farmhouse had only one ceiling fan working, and that was located in the dining room. Occasionally, a warm breeze would filter into the living room, bringing with it a funky smell that the old man could no longer detect with his nose. This was the same smell that permeated his home year round. And although much of his family neither cared for him nor his funky old farmhouse, July Fourth was approaching, and it was always a very special time for the Smiths. It was the one time of the year that he was heralded as head of the family, master chef of the grill, sage of the tribe, chief of all the Smith clan (at least in that part of the county). And oh, how the old man loved his fireworks too!

News Alert: "We have just received new information on the U.S. soldiers killed earlier today outside Fallujah. The number is now up to 44 dead with many more wounded. A Sunni-Shia alliance of

some sort is believed to be responsible. At this point we do not know who was specifically behind the attack. All we know is that the attack came early this morning and took American troops completely by surprise."

While the old man was glued to the television (and while Thomas was nodding off into oblivion on the couch next to him), Doris, one of his daughters, had stopped by with her youngest son, Glenn. Still an attractive woman in her late 40s, with a slender body, curvaceous hips and flowing red hair, Doris had the uneasy job of being "mom" to five often rowdy males. Two of her boys were still in grade school, another worked in an auto-body shop, her son, Owen, was in the army overseas, and her oldest was the town drunk.

Doris was fixing an early dinner for her father while Glenn, Thomas, and the old man were in the living room. The tall, gaunt Glenn did not particularly

care for his cousin, Thomas. At thirteen years of age, Glenn was only two years older than Thomas, but his maturity level was leap-years ahead. So the two youths remained seated on opposite ends of the couch.

"Gitmo prisoner rights! Who ever heard of such a thing? I'll give them their rights - the right to get their asses kicked." Old man Smith loved to grandstand in front of company. He would talk out loud while he watched the news, making bold declamations and posing rhetorical questions, all in an effort to look more intelligent than he actually was. His grandstanding usually had the opposite effect, however. Practically everyone he knew, townsfolk and family alike, spotted him for a blowhard eons ago. "I don't know why we're wasting our time and manpower. We ought'a just nuke those uncivilized sons 'a bitches and be done with it. Everybody knows Saddam was behind 9/11 anyway."

News: "The death toll has risen to 58 dead, hundreds more wounded - the result of a combined Sunni-Shia front against American troops. It is speculated that chemical weapons may have been used. We've also gotten word that British troops experienced a smaller, though unspecified, number of casualties in the south of the country."

*"Fuckin' rag-heads! No good sneaky bastards!"*

"Pop! The children are here, ya know?"  
Doris's authoritative, yet feminine, voice abruptly silenced the old man from the next room.

"Okay, okay, hush," the old man replied.

For the next few minutes, old man Smith was completely silent, absorbing all the bad news emanating from the TV and (somehow) not responding. Everything from the Abu Ghraib prison scandal to date rape and the high

number of unwed mothers penetrated unchallenged through the old man's psyche.

Out of sheer boredom, Glenn was ready to go into the kitchen to see what his mother was up to. And portly little Thomas was falling asleep with a lollipop in his mouth. Then, suddenly, Smith turned to face the two boys, whipping his meager-framed body away from the television as if possessed. Startled, the boys flinched in their seats.

"I'm gonna let you young fellas in on a little family secret. America's greatness has a lot to do with our family. We're a family of heroes." The boys' eyes lit up with amazement as the old man put them under his storytelling spell. "From the time of the heroic Thaddeus Smith of the Revolutionary War, right on through to today with Glenn's older brother, Owen. We are a family of heroes." Now it was the old man's turn to flash his eyes, as though it gave him some sort of orgasmic pleasure to dub his clan brave.

He continued: "See, I happen to know this country's *great*. And, despite what some folks'll tell ya, it's not because of our laws, or Constitution, or the welfare we give dagoes and darkies. It's because none of us Smiths ever died fighting for our nation. And our direct line of ancestors fought in *every* major U.S. war there was.

This country's great because of an oath that my great-great-great-great grandfather, Thaddeus Smith, swore in his cousin's presence. But not just any cousin, his first cousin, General George Washington." The old man nodded in self-righteous affirmation.

"That's right. General George *Washington*," he re-emphasized fervently. "See now, Thaddeus's oath protected successive generations of Smiths and maintained our country's great cause of liberty. It went something like this: 'May no one from our clan ever die in future entanglements, domestic or foreign, if this Cause be true.' And it was true. Two hundred years ago, boys, we freed ourselves from an oppressive

Limey government, and today we're freeing the Ey-rackees from their own oppressive forces. There's absolutely no difference." Glenn and Thomas had never before seen their grandfather speak so fervently and yet quasi-intelligently at the same time. They were truly amazed.

Old man Smith then began rattling off brief biographies of the direct line of Smiths who had fought in every major American conflict. Thaddeus H. Smith (1743-1821), the old man's great-great-great-great grandfather, served with distinction under Washington himself; Thaddeus's son, Daniel (1785-1853), helped repel the British from New Orleans in the War of 1812; Daniel's son, Asa (1810-1878), was the hero of a series of battles in the Mexican-American War; Asa's son, Samson (1839-1913), was awarded the Medal of Honor for his extraordinary bravery at Gettysburg; Samson's son, Harold (1870-1955), was one of the only men in his company who was not stricken with malaria in the Spanish-American War; Harold's

son, Harry Jr. (1896-1974), made it through trench after trench in the First World War; old man Smith, himself (1920-), survived a few fierce encounters with the Japanese in World War II; his brother won the Navy Cross in Korea; old man Smith's son, Jesse (1950-), survived the Vietnamese meat-grinder and was given a purple-heart for the little finger he left behind; his other son, Philip (1962-1998), made it through the First Gulf War, but died of a mysterious disease several years later; and Jesse's son, Owen (1982-), was currently serving in Iraq.

Old man Smith's simple logic maintained that America was always justified in its wars since none of his ancestors nor living family members had ever died in combat. He never thought for one minute, on account of his behemoth pride, of the millions of other people who had lost loved ones in American conflicts. After all, *they* did not possess the same heroic blue blood that coursed so prolifically through the veins of Smith and clan.

Again the old man felt it necessary to remind the boys, "Even Jesse was only wounded in Vietnam."

It seemed as though the crotchety old man's grandkids had finally found a new respect for him. After the story, the typically silent Glenn managed to squeak out (somewhat happily): "You're cool, Grandpa." Thomas remained wide-eyed, lolli-pop in mouth. Both kids now seemed to realize that their nation's bright torch of liberty would never be extinguished as long as other blue-blooded Smiths went out to bat for America in times of crisis. Indeed, America's future seemed to look as bright and rosy as the future of the Smith clan itself.

"Now let's see what's on the old tube." Smith turned toward his magic box and started going through the channels: 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85 - just as the TV stopped on Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Commando*, the phone rang in the kitchen.



"Look, there's Owen," said Thomas pointing to the screen. (Schwarzenegger stoically mowing down whole divisions of white stuntmen dressed up as Latin American soldiers.) The boys chuckled.

Annoyed by the way his daughter sometimes gabs on the phone for hours, old man Smith bellowed, "Getting hungry, Doris."

But this was going to be an unexpectedly short phone call. Just a few seconds after Doris picked up the phone, dishes dropped in the kitchen, and then came the blood-curdling scream: "OWEN!"

The two boys turned toward each other in fright. The severe pain Glenn's mother was in - the screaming, the wailing, the crying - could only mean one thing. They did not know exactly what was said on the phone, and yet they all knew what the anguish was about (even Thomas).

Too old and too hard to cry, having frequented too many funerals in the past, and already sensing that Owen now belonged to the ages, the old man murmured to himself, "You were right, Uncle George. You were right. Beware of foreign entanglements."